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JAPANESE ART ENAMELS.



Iron panel ornamented in relief with sparrows, iris and grasses wrought in silver, gold, shakudo and shibuichi.

THE value of enamels as a means of decoration has been felt from the earliest ages by every civilized nation. Enamel may be either embedded, which is termed cloisonné which is the oldest of all processes, champlevé, translucent and painted. Cloisonné enamel is also called incrusted, and is produced by filling small cells, or compartments of the ornament, which are filled by means of slender strips of metal, fused or welded to a ground likewise of metal. These compartments are filled with enamel, which is a glass composed of lead, sand and borax, colored by means of metallic oxides. The piece is then placed in the furnace, by which the compound is fused, or vitrified, and when the fusion is complete each compartment appears set in thin bright wire. The piece is then withdrawn

and allowed to cool slowly, and when thoroughly cool it is ground and polished. The old artists were very careful in the preparation of their enamels using none but pure gold, so that the plate might not be injured from the action of the fire. The enamels produced by the Chinese and Japanese are cloisonné, and their work includes animals, flowers, foliage, the rich plumage of birds, the mystic glitter of serpents scales, undulating water, etc., the various parts of the piece being encircled in a bright metallic outline. The enamel may be rendered translucent or opaque at will. There are over 250 varieties of color, and new colors are produced every day.

In champlevé the cells for the reception of the enamel are sunk, or cut, by means of a graver in the plate itself, which is usually of copper. This process is much more laborious, and the design cannot be made as flowing as with the flexible gold wire. Champlevé is generally applied to larger surfaces, whose intervening space may be left in the metal itself, and afterwards engraved, forming a pleasing contrast to the enameled designs. Another form of champlevé, or embedded enamel, of very soft and charming effect, is obtained by placing two or three graduated tints of the colored enamel in the same cell. This, though satisfactory in small objects, cannot be applied to those of large dimensions. Painted enamel is applied in successive layers over the whole surface of the metal plate, and decorated with fusible metallic oxides. The article is then subjected to the furnace, when the metal is fused into the enamel. Enamels are sometimes covered with a thin transparent layer, which lets in the light at the back. The sharp outline is what makes cloisonné and incised enamel so satisfactory.

The art of applying enamel to gold and silver was produced in China, Japan and India at a very early period, whence it passed into Assyria, Persia, Egypt and Europe. The old Egyptians and Greeks used enamels to form their ornaments, and exquisite specimens have been found in their tombs, comprising birds, flowers and foliage, executed with a high degree of skill and dexterity. Brooches, earrings and the like have also been found in England and Ireland, showing that the art was known during the Roman occupation, if not before. In France, Germany, Italy and England many beautiful specimens of enamel have been executed, and from the 10th to the 16th century enamel was applied to all manner of things, such as armor, caskets, candle sticks, ewers, basins, book covers, rings, etc. In the present day, vases, flagons, chalices, candelabra and jewelry are so enriched.

We doubt if any form of the enameller's art can equal the work executed in Japan, which is distinguished by great freedom of design, and the most exquisite gradations of color. There was lately exhibited at the American Art Galleries in this city a collection of Japanese enamels executed by Namikawa, Morimoto, Suzuki and Yamada. Amongst Japanese enamellers Namikawa, of Tokyo, is pre-eminent. Indeed, in his own field, he has no world left to conquer. He has been decorated at the Mikado's hands, he has done all the enamelling throughout the royal palace, and wins always the highest prizes at the fine arts exhibitions throughout the world. Among his especially notable pieces may be mentioned a pair of tall, dark red vases, with maple leaf decoration; a panel containing a wild duck flying athwart the misty moon; one or two pieces rendering plum blossoms in mist, and two pairs of smaller vases with decoration of ducks and chickens amid snow.

Fig. 1 is a panel in shaded enamel, by Namikawa. The design represents the full moon in a mist, with a life sized duck floating across it. Underneath, bamboo stalks indicate a marsh. The bird is wonderfully spirited in pose, the color and texture of its feathers being exactly indicated. The height of the panel is 25 inches and the width 18 inches.

Figs. 2 and 3 (the pair of vases) are by Suzuki, Kyoto. The design is an iris flower, strongly drawn, in enamels of natural colors on a ground of brilliant mirror black enamel. There are fine

border patterns around neck and base, the height of the vase being 19 inches.

Fig. 4 is an enamelled koro, oblong shape, by Honda, of Nagoya. In diamond shaped panels are elaborate designs of dragons and the sacred bird; the border and a wide band are ornamented with similar designs, all in beautifully combined enamels in silver wire. The cover is enamelled with mythological subjects. The height is 14 inches and the diameter 12 inches.

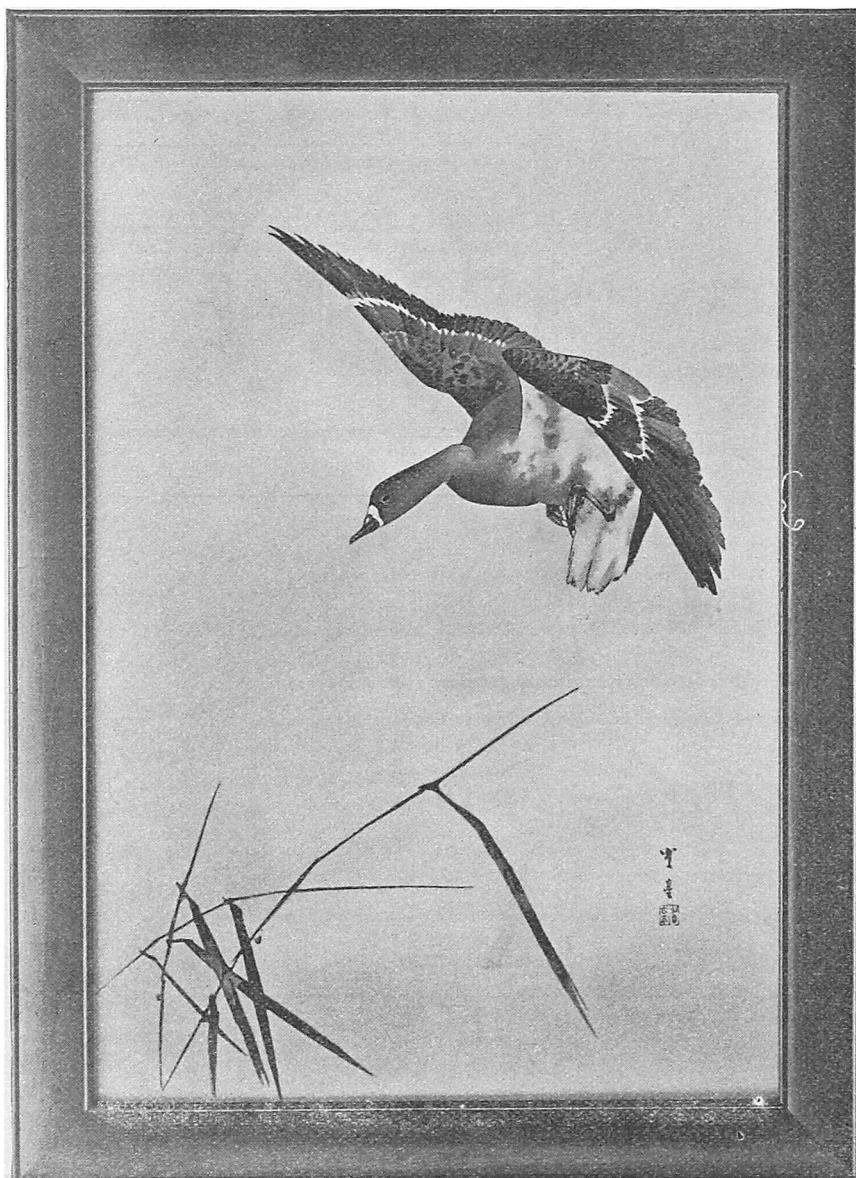


FIG. 1—ENAMEL PANEL. BY NAMIKAWA SOSUKE.